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ABSTRACT

Faced with a frustrating lack of ability to solve the problem of providing educational opportunities for inner city children, many have turned, in frustration and despair, to the creation of myths about the whole enterprise, including achievement testing. Three myths about educational achievement testing and inner city children that are addressed are: (a) the myth that test results ought to be taken very seriously; (b) the myth that abolishing or reducing testing will cause the educational deficits of inner city children to disappear; and (c) the myth that inner city children will never do as well as other children on nationally normed tests. The third myth is a prime example of the new racist outlook developing and spreading across this country. Among the groups that endorse the myth that inner city children will not be able to do well on standardized tests as a group are some blacks and other minorities who call for less emphasis on regular academic achievement and more emphasis on sub-culture knowledge which has little or no importance in a wider world. Among the conclusions made are the following: that test scores do not create ignorance but they reveal it; that ignorance is the problem and not the method of revealing it; and, that abolishing a method of revealing ignorance will not eliminate ignorance. Finally, inner city children will be able to do well in standardized tests as soon as they are given the knowledge and skills necessary. (Author/AM)

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Myths About Testing and Inner City Children

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Myths serve a deep and abiding function in the psychology of us all. They mediate between the reality with which we are mainly in contact for most of our daily lives and the vast unknown that is always present and affects us in ways that we, creatures of a limited time and place, cannot know.

It is one of the myths of the present scientific age to believe that myths exist only for primitive peoples and were believed by our early ancestors but do not much influence our own times and actions. Such is not the case. We all live with various myths about ourselves, our society, and man's relation to a yet unclear First Principle.

Testing is not necessarily a very important aspect of existence about which myths ought to be generated. Yet, faced with a frustrating lack of ability to solve what ought to be a simple problem -- better

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educational opportunities for inner city children -- many have turned, in frustration and despair, to the creation of myths about the whole enterprise -- including achievement testing.

Myths develop when there is a lack of information and when calamities and misfortunes affect the lives of men. Great disappointments have attended the efforts to correct the obviously poor educational situations of inner city children. If Head Start, Follow Through, Title I, Sesame Street, Electric Company, and hundreds of other smaller and ingenious projects had immediately produced the resounding academic success our money ought to buy -- why, then, we would all be pleased and there would be no need for myths! But the results, although postive, have not been overwhelmingly strong and some persons have turned upon the messenger in frustration.

The three myths about educational achievement testing and inner city children that I would like to focus on today are:

> the myth that test results ought to be taken so terribly seriously by all concerned
>
> the myth that abolishing or reducing testing will cause the educational deficits of inner city children to disappear
>
> the myth of the new racists that inner city children will never do as well as other children on nationally normed tests.

The myth about the terrible importance of test results has developed and been fostered by individuals of very diverse persuasions. That is, both advocates and enemies of testing in education have engendered a feeling about test results that would have been incomprehensible a few

years ago. By focusing on this "thermometer reading" of the patient, rather than the underlying causes of the problem, both sides have avoided the much more difficult task of determining what to do.

The impression has been created by the rhetoric of confrontation and scapegoating that the test instruments and the test results are what is important and not the underlying low level of ability to read and answer a fair number of perfectly reasonable questions sampling some defined content areas, questions written by and improved by the best ways that competently trained and educationally oriented persons have been able to devise.

What would you do if you wanted to know how your own child was doing in learning about anything? Would you not ask him some questions and see how he answered them? Would you not judge him well prepared if he could answer many or most of your questions accurately and judge him ill prepared if he could answer only your most simple questions? In a formally prepared achievement test an attempt is made to improve this procedure by getting more ideas about what questions should be asked and spending more time perfecting and improving the questions before asking children to respond to them.

On the other hand those advocating testing have acted as though test results could be substituted for intellectual effort and judgment. Any persons who have administered tests to children in the inner city who hardly speak English and then have placed those children in mentally retarded classes on the basis of such scores alone have entirely too much confidence in tests and no confidence in their own common sense.

Tests are man-made, changing as needed, and subject to lack of precision and applicability in some individual cases. Inner city children may be tested with most instruments available and be fairly assessed on how they can handle certain academic content areas, but they should not be considered permanently dull or retarded because they have not yet developed a certain specific knowledge, such as how to read. It will be hard for some to keep the assessment of present status independent from judgment about what the student may eventually be able to achieve with suitable training and involvement, but this independence must be accomplished.

There should be no emotionalism about test results. The results are as obtained. Look at the questions and if they are reasonable questions on the topic, the results must be accepted. What we should be getting excited about (and indeed what we did get excited about a few years back before we discovered the deficits were not so easy to correct as we had thought) is the low level of ability to answer questions so carefully put and so diligently designed.

It is not test results that create the problem; the same low level of performance could have been revealed equally easily by a teacher survey, private questioning using your own questions, asking parents about their children, observing the children in their studies, or numerous other ways we commonly use to form our opinions of people and things. The test results were only one way of seeing that a problem existed; such results are only one way of continuing to see that a real problem exists. The problem is ignorance.

The myth that we can solve the problem of ignorance by abolishing or drastically reducing the use of tests in our educational enterprise is so patently false that it also would not even have been considered a few short years ago. Yet, today we must recognize it as one of the most common myths believed in and even being acted upon by some otherwise presumably rational persons in positions of leadership in education and politics.

Tests provide information. Information thought important by representative teachers in the areas being surveyed by the pre-written and pre-tested questions in the test book. The questions would not be there if subject-matter experts and teachers had not felt they were reasonable questions that some portion of the students should be able to answer. This assumption has been verified by pre-testing with actual samples of students. Unlike teacher-made tests, standardized test questions must be reviewed by several other people, endorsed by committees of examiners, rewritten and improved and pre-tested, and carefully edited and designed before being presented for use. Additionally they must be purchased and there lies the ultimate veto when a test fails to measure what it is felt should be measured.

If any tests should be curtailed until improved, they are the teacher-made tests that influence educators' opinions about children, are used to assign course grades, and thus become the "permanent record" that is carried with a student for the rest of his days.

If we abolish standardized testing, the educational deficits of inner city children will not disappear -- they will just be harder to

uncover. And grievous errors in student placement will hardly diminish. What we want to abolish is ignorance and (as we have learned in the past ten years) that takes more than rhetoric, executive orders, or programs half-heartedly implemented and abandoned when our instant magic does not produce instant results. So much for Myth number 2.

The third myth -- that inner city children will never do well on standardized tests -- is a prime example of the new racists' outlook developing and spreading across this country. Unfortunately, persons who normally would not be associated with racists believe this particular myth.

There are those who endorse this myth of the new racism because it is just a dressed up version of the old racism: blacks and other minorities are basically inferior and incapable of meeting the competitive world of the white man.

The other group that endorses the myth that inner city children will not be able to do well on standardized tests is a group that actually includes some blacks and other minorities. These are people who call for new and different criteria of success (including new tests) because down deep they have accepted the racist beliefs of mass inferiority and feel that only they were smart enough to succeed. They doubt the ability of inner city children in general. In their positions of leadership they see only one way to continue to move their people forward and that is to change the game. In particular, they have called for less emphasis on regular academic achievement and more emphasis on subculture knowledge which has little or no importance in a wider world.

As a child I knew a great deal about the way kids talked on the West side of St. Paul and the North side of Minneapolis and where the best stores were to filch free candy and small trinkets, but such knowledge has not helped me much since and, in some cases, has gotten in my way in trying to accomplish larger personal objectives and more socially oriented goals.

The new racists like the attack on standardized testing because it allows them to hit something we all dislike (having to meet a standard in our performance) while accomplishing an underlying objective of continuing to hold inner city people in bondage and away from the rewards that go to those who know and can do. In their own minds, the racists once again prove their superiority by fooling some blacks and other minorities into chanting along with them for the end of standards -- that is, for the end to having an objective standard out there that cannot be denied in a court of law. The new racists do not want inner city children to do well on tests and they would even like to eliminate testing so they can get back to the old subjective system of letting in those they like, for the reasons they prefer, with qualifications that cannot be objectively determined. They want testing to die because thousands of minority students were admitted to colleges and universities on the basis of superior test scores and irrefutable, demonstrable ability and knowledge on standardized tests. Not only did these students get in, they went on to secure competitive skills and have taken some of the positions of power away from those who would have denied them admittance.

The inner city child that can demonstrate ability and knowledge on a standardized test today can (if that is his desire) escape the inner city through further education that leads to economic returns, allowing the choice of living and doing as one pleases in this country. Block that opportunity to demonstrate achieved accomplishment or take it away, and racists can return to keeping inner city people and any (of the rest of us) in the confines they have decided are allowable.

Let me return to my three myths which hang together as a whole. Test scores do not create ignorance; they reveal it. Ignorance is the problem; the method of revealing it is not. And abolishing a method of revealing ignorance will not eliminate ignorance. Finally, inner city kids will be able to do well on standardized tests just as soon as we give them the knowledge and the skills necessary. But if we eliminate standards, especially if we eliminate pertinent and objective standards, we change the game once again drastically -- even unalterably -- and the old racists in new hoods can once again subjectively keep anyone down and keep anyone where they want them. These are the myths about testing and the inner city child that I would like to dispel. These are dangerous myths. And they are unnecessary myths.

The truth is, joyously, inner city children can learn. And they will meet the competition if we educators of this generation do not capitulate, if we continue to move each individual forward, in the best way we can, if we persevere....and work....and do not believe defeating myths.

Some good reading on various points in my speech and many others of interest in the general area of urban education:

Alloway, D. N., & Cordasco, F. Minorities and the American city: A sociological primer for educators. New York: David McKay, 1970.

Gentry, A., Jones, B., Peelle, C., Phillips, R., Woodbury, J., & Woodbury, R. Urban education: The hope factor. Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1972.

Marshall, K. Law and order in Grade 6-E: A story of chaos and innovation in a ghetto school. Boston: Little, Brown, 1972.